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ABSTRACT

Supportive classroom environments can enhance students' learning about their own diversity as well as that of others. Discussing basic diversity variables such as gender, age, and race can raise awareness and conscious decision making about how students use and view communication in their everyday lives. A graduate student instructor enhances her classroom climate by incorporating teaching literature, communication techniques learned through her training program, and classroom experiences when supportive behaviors have been adopted. A supportive climate is the result of supportive messages and comes from the instructor's conscious awareness of where his or her students are in terms of personal development and maturity. Supportiveness can be categorized into five major categories: informational, tangible aid, emotional, network, and esteem support. Using these supportive techniques are especially important when discussions about cultural diversity arise. Strategies to create safe environments where students can take risks and break the taboo of silence are: (1) create a community atmosphere; (2) demonstrate respect; (3) invite and encourage discussion; and (4) personalize the issues. Two cultural diversity activities are "Concentric Identity Circles" and "Who Will Survive?" (RS)

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Running head: Establishing a supportive climate

Establishing the Environment: Setting a Supportive Climate

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Introduction

To feel supported is one of the basic human aspects that is often underestimated, especially when topics such as diversity are at the forefront. The power of supportiveness could be the difference between being successful and not even trying, understanding and destruction, or enlightenment and confusion. In the classroom, as educators, we have the opportunity to create a supportive climate that fosters success and personal growth. Through a supportive classroom climate, students have the opportunity to mature as capable and interculturally sensitive communicators. A supportive classroom climate can foster a sense of safety and respect for the students to discuss their own prejudices as well as their own experiences with diversity. As a result, not only becoming aware of diversity issues, but applying diversity issues can occur through experiential experience.

The focus of this paper examines how supportive classroom climates can enhance learning about student's own diversity as well as others. Discussion about diversity can be a sensitive issue in the classroom. Diversity not only addresses who we are as individuals, but our own prejudices and experiences with different people. However, with America becoming more diverse, it is imperative we address the issue of diversity head on. In order to do this in the classroom it is important that students feel comfortable and safe within their environment. Discussing basic diversity variables such as gender, age, and race can raise awareness and conscious decision making about how students use and view communication in their everyday lives. In order to arrive at this point, a level of trust, respect, and supportiveness must be established.

Through experiential learning, students can gain a sense of this support, while actively communicating about diversity, achieving a sense of self-awareness of their own prejudices, and arriving at some of their own conclusions about how and why they communicate differently with certain people.

First, a brief background about my experience in the classroom and my role as an instructor will be discussed. Second, I will offer what constitutes supportive behaviors and factors that contribute toward creating a supportive classroom climate. Next, supportive strategies will be discussed that can be used while leading discussions surrounding culturally diverse topics. Finally, pedagogical activities will be offered that serve as tools towards promoting students' awareness of their own biases and cultural prejudices.

Program Background

My interest in supportive climates emerged during my first semester involved in Central Michigan University's Basic Course Program. Unlike most master's level graduate programs, the program offers graduate instructors their own individual classes to teach. Before entering into the classroom, our program also requires a three week intensive teaching program. During these three weeks, new instructors are introduced to the content of the course by completing most of the assignments their students will be assigned. Second, teaching techniques, such as lecturing, asking processing questions, and developing lesson plans are demonstrated and practiced before instructors enter the classroom. Third, questions are answered, issues are addressed, and responsibilities are explained. I have not only been through the

program as a first year instructor, but also as the assistant to the basic course director by implementing and facilitating the teaching program. I have now been teaching the introductory communication course for three semesters. My love for teaching coupled with my interest in supportive communication has lead me to this project. I offer ways to enhance classroom climates through the use of supportive communication by incorporating teaching literature, communication techniques learned through our training program and classroom experiences when supportive behaviors have been adopted.

Supportive Climate

Although I am still a novice, I believe strongly that the establishment of the classroom environment is largely attributed to the instructor. While other components such as student demographics, course topics, and level of the course have an influence on how the class will function as a whole, the instructor is the most important factor that determines classroom climate. Cooper (1991) offers that more than any other person, the teacher sets the classroom climate. Setting standards, enforcing norms, and fostering active learning are responsibilities of an instructor. Using supportive techniques and behaviors can only enhance the learning process.

A supportive climate is the result of supportive messages; supportive messages are those that convey informational, tangible aid, emotional, network, and esteem support. Messages are only supportive if the feeling of support arises. If supportive messages are not seen or felt as if they are really intended to be supportive, then a sense of artificial intentions may be felt by students and awkwardness felt by the

instructor.

Albrecht and Adelman (1987) define social support as, "verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience" (p. 19). The primary source of this communication is the instructor. Once students reciprocate these behaviors with the instructor or other class members a supportive climate is being established. During class one day, a student, Mike, was feeling unsure about a topic he had chosen to research for a class project. The topic was inhalant abuse among adolescents. Mike expressed uncertainty about the topic, fearing he would not be able to find enough research on the topic. Another student, Alice, over heard us talking and offered the following comment: "If you are going to research inhalant abuse I can get you some information from my dad's medical library. He's a doctor. I'm going home this weekend and I can get you some information." Slightly surprised, yet pleased Mike accepted her offer. At the end of class they exchanged phone numbers and planned a time to meet. This example illustrates support from Alice by reducing Mike's uncertainty about gathering research for his topic. Mike then has regained a perception of personal control over his assignment by accepting Alice's offer. Both established a future meeting to fulfill the supportive offer.

A supportive climate comes from the instructor's conscious awareness of where his or her students are in terms of personal development and maturity. This awareness can develop by actively observing student's interactions. I enforce the importance of

being supportive and active learners in the classroom. This is done at the being of the semester. However, constant reinforcement of this norm continues throughout the semester.

Supporting students can be done using a variety of teaching methods. Before jumping into specific supportive communication techniques, let's step back and look at five basic types of support. Taking an active role as a support agent includes implementing five types of supportive behaviors. These support categories are suggestions toward creating a supportive climate. According to Cutrona and Suhr (1992) supportiveness can be categorized into five major categories: informational, tangible aid, emotional, network, and esteem support. Each aspect of support offers unique assistance according to the needs of students. Understanding these five types of support provides a foundation for implementing supportive messages into the classroom. These types also offer a reference point for specific supportive strategies later offered.

Informational support includes advice, factual input, and feedback about the person's actions. Feedback includes clarifying knowledge about course concepts, giving feedback on speeches, and providing feedback on student's diversity comments. How feedback is given is especially important when the latter occurs. Using descriptive, rather than evaluative feedback allows the student to reflect on his or her own behavior or comment. For example, once a derogatory comment was made about homosexuals. This comment was not only offensive, but personally hurtful because I have many gay friends. It is difficult to be descriptive when it seems like the

instructor is being attacked. Although the offensive nature of the comment was not overlooked, detailed feedback was offered on why the comment was not appropriate: other students in the class might be gay, I might be gay, comments like that may effect your future as an employee, other's may interpret you are ignorant, or being judgmental which can hurt yourself. This feedback asks the student to think about how he or she communicates. Second, the way we discuss differences can not only effect others, but be detrimental to his or her relationships and/or careers.

Tangible aid is providing needed goods and services. I offer note cards for speeches, VCRs and TVs for presentations, and my extra textbooks used during class periods. I also announce any upcoming events or campus activities that the students may not be aware of. I also ask the students for any announcements they may have for the class. For example, a student, Brad, announced he had gone to an on campus presentation given by Spike Lee. I asked him questions about what Spike Lee talked specifically about and what perceptions Brad had of him as a speaker and film director. Because Spike Lee is well recognized as film director for such movies as Malcolm X and Do The Right Thing, this lead to discussion about the power of media plays in forming our perceptions of different people. Since I previously used a Malcolm X movie clip to illustrate audience adaptation, the class had the opportunity to relate to the discussion.

Emotional support involves the expression of caring, concern, empathy, and sympathy. These behaviors are necessary for those students who are going through a rough time at home or at school. I try not to single anyone out during class. I make a

point to tell my students that if they are going through a rough time or need extra help, to come see me during my office hours or call me at home. It is difficult to assess when students need emotional support or if they want it from an instructor. Sometimes students' appearances or the presence of a negative attitude in class indicate their need for caring. I noticed one student's appearance changed dramatically throughout the semester. She had constant changes and crises throughout the four months she was in the course. I showed care and concern by calling her at home and communicating that she could call me at home. While my policies still were enforced, I expressed my concern for her by asking her daily how she was dealing with issues. Other students will not give such noticeable signs. For example, I had a student who exhibited an overall general bad attitude. Once and a while she would give her input during discussions, but not very often. After being absent consistently, she came to me and told me she needed to talk to me. During a private conversation with her, she revealed to me that she has been suffering from depression and tried to commit suicide the previous week and was at home recovering. I offered sympathy by expressing what a difficult time it must be for her and I am glad she is taking care of herself. In this case, both the student and I were lucky. She started counseling and she told me about her situation. However, I don't know if she would have disclosed to me, if she did not feel comfortable with me as an instructor. While teaching content to our students is important, perhaps more importantly is showing our compassion for their well being as growing, changing, young learners.

Network and esteem support are the last two types of supportiveness. Network

support gives a person a sense of belonging. Benton and Daniel (1996) encourage creating a sense of community in the classroom. Like any community, there often arises a sense of responsibility. Using experiential learning can enhance the student's sense of community and belonging. As active learners, each student is not only responsible for their own success, but the group's learning success. Participating in learning activities empowers students to create and process their education.

Esteem support expresses regard for one's skills, abilities and intrinsic support. A way of doing this is to encourage and recognize student's strengths rather than their weaknesses. I have always been a strong believer in positive reinforcement. No matter how small or insignificant some successes are to others, students take to heart the smallest steps when they are recognized for their abilities. Whether it be speaking up during class for the first time or presenting a two minute speech, the smallest step could lead to more participation or self awareness.

Having a positive attitude towards yourself, your students, and the learning process is one of the back bones toward establishing a supportive climate. Research on teacher effectiveness suggests that communication variables such as humor, warmth, openness, enthusiasm, and attentiveness are extremely important in classroom interaction and in building a positive classroom climate (Cooper, 1991).

Cooper offers five factors that are necessary for a supportive classroom climate. The factors that contribute to a supportive environment include challenge, freedom, respect, warmth, control, and success. By challenging students with activities and assignments that have a high completion rate, success can be built upon other

successes. Copper suggests saying, 'This is hard work, but I think that you can do it.' Freedom means that the students will learn, provided the material appears to be relevant to their lives and provided they have the freedom to explore and to discover it's meaning for themselves. Third, the rule for respect says that whenever we treat a student with respect, we add to his or her self-respect. When we embarrass or humiliate a student, we encourage disrespectful behavior towards him or herself and ourselves. Warmth surrounds a supportive educational atmosphere where each student is made to feel that he or she belongs in the classroom and that we care what happens to him or her. Students feel warmth when they are praised rather than punished, approached with courtesy instead of sarcasm, and consulted in preference to being dictated to. Classroom control does not require embarrassment or ridicule. The secret to control is within the teacher's own leadership qualities. Classroom control is likely to be maintained when the teacher is prepared for class, avoids the appearance of confusion, explains why some things must be done, and strives for consistency, politeness, and firmness. Finally, a successful atmosphere is perhaps the most important step that teachers are capable of implementing. Providing opportunities for success that are viewed as obtainable for the students, by the students and allow students to make mistakes without penalty is critical.

Discussion about Diversity

Utilizing these supportive techniques are especially important when discussions about cultural diversity arise. From my experience, graduate instructors have a tendency to ignore issues such as homosexuality, age, and race. For example, one

graduate instructor admitted that she feels uncomfortable with a nontraditional student in her class. Not knowing why the student was taking the class and the instructor's lack of experience with older students created unnecessary tension between the instructor and the student. I suggested talking with the student to develop rapport or perhaps some common ground. The instructor declined. She felt it was too risky to openly discuss such issues. Openly acknowledging a person who is ten years older may offend some people, because they should be viewed as a learner, not as an "older student." However, addressing the issue can eliminate uncertainty, not only for the instructor but perhaps the student as well. Openly acknowledging a difference may increase the relationship comfort level and learning level for both the instructor and the student. Because of the lack of knowledge about cultural issues is predominate among beginning instructors, graduate instructors have high uncertainty about addressing these issues. To lessen this uncertainty, beginning instructors are encouraged to discuss their fears and dilemmas with faculty, colleagues, and staff.

Recently, the staff of the basic course has implemented diversity into our teaching program for the first year instructors, however a word of caution. New graduate instructors are in the process of developing their own supportive classroom climate. Addressing diversity issues can not be a one time event. A constant dialogue with diversity at the forefront is suggested. New instructors can then feel a higher comfort level when diversity issues are addressed in the classroom.

Discussing diversity can be risky for all involved, but doing so can create awareness and culturally sensitive communicators. Instructionally supportive

behaviors can enhance the opportunity to discuss and learn about diversity in the classroom. Now that supportive factors have been discussed coupled with a discussion about diversity, specific supportive strategies will be offered that help open the door for diversity discussion. Utilizing these strategies, a range of experiential activities can be adapted to incorporate diversity into educational experiences. In addition, activities that focus on cultural diversity specifically will be offered. As with other activities, these can also be adapted to incorporate other communication base variables, e.g. forming perceptions, self-concept, and small group communication.

Supportive Strategies

Benton and Daniel (1996) present strategies to create safe environments where students can take risks and break the taboo of silence that insulates these topics of cultural diversity. These strategies are reported here.

1. Create a community atmosphere; It is important to get to know your students and build relationships in order to create a community. In most situations, there is a certain level of comfort that is felt when students can put a name with a face. I have students sit in a circle so they can see each other and share individual interests. I call on students by name in order to personalize the classroom. I usually have the class participate in the "name game" early in the semester. The activity includes all students and requires that students sit in a circle so that everyone can be seen. Each student describes themselves by adding an adjective before their name. The adjective must start with the same letter as their first name. For example, Sharon's adjective would start with an 'S', such as super or spectacular. The person then repeats the previous

name and then states their name. The next repeats each person's name that went previously and so on. When I do this, I am the last to repeat all the names. This activity enables students to learn each other's names and more importantly allows the instructor to learn each student's name.

As Benton and Daniel (1996) explain, students often tell them their class has been their first university course in which they knew the names of their classmates and had the opportunity to talk with each other. This has been my experience. Incorporating experiential learning into a required communication course often creates an appreciation for active learning. Recently, a student told me that he just slept in his previous class because he knew that he couldn't sleep in our class. Not that I encourage students to sleep in any class, but the expectation that their input and participation is expected everyday leads students toward becoming active learners.

2. Demonstrate Respect; The first step towards establishing respect is for the instructor to demonstrate behaviors that are expected from students. For example, when a student is speaking, listen to what he or she is saying rather than preparing for what is coming up next. Not only is the instructor validating the student's personal experience, but acting as a role model for the other students. According to Goodman (1995) we can offer a positive role model for the students and lead by examples. If the expectation is that students are going to discuss differences among others, perceptions about different people, and their own experiences with diversity, it should be expected from the instructor as well. Participating in and leading discussion can be a useful technique, especially when discussing diversity among a diverse classroom.

3. Invite and Encourage Discussion; Students learn more when they are actively engaged. This means allowing time for silence. Silence was one of the topics discussed during my training as a graduate instructor. It feels unnatural to have silence in the classroom. Because it is uncomfortable not only for the students but for many instructors, students expect instructors to talk as soon as there is silence. Many instructors do. Being aware of the silence and practicing not to start talking when there is silence is one way of preventing this to happen. This is known as 'wait time.' Benton et al. suggest using nonverbal cues to communicate that it is their responsibility to talk with each other rather than relying on the instructor.

Another way of promoting open communication is by moving students into smaller cooperative learning groups (Benton & Daniel, 1996). Depending on the class culture, it has been my experience that groups often allow quiet students to speak. However, it is also important to monitor group progress and interaction by walking around and being available for questions.

4. Personalize the issues; Sharing your own stories with students allows them to feel as though you are a person with diversity experiences too. These stories become a reference point for students to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions. A story that I often tell to my class is one that involves my relationship with a male friend. As the story is told, I often make comments about gender and how communication can be difficult between men and women. Then I ask the <u>When Harry Met Sally</u> question, "Can men and women be friends?". Usually, the discussion revolves around stereotypes, personal experiences, and perceptions the students have about gender.

While this diversity issue is often initially taken lightly, the discussion usually brings to light some dating expectations and assumptions about the other gender.

Cultural Diversity Activities

Activity: Concentric Identity Circles, Frederick (1995)

Have students put their unique individual selves in the center circle and describe distinct characteristics that they have and no one else has. In the next circle have students identify all the groups they belong to (ethnic, religious, teams, clubs, etc.). Students then list or name all the characteristics they have in common as Americans in the next circle. And finally, in the outer most circle, the traits and characteristics they share with humans throughout the plant, regardless or culture or national identity are identified. It is helpful to do this as a whole class rather than in groups. As it is discussed students will learn about new categories from other students. The circles exercise provides a framework to help students put diversity issues into perspective.

Activity: Who will survive?, Taylor (1995)

In the "Who will survive?" activity, students (some cases faculty) are asked to form culturally diverse groups. In a lower level course, for example an introductory communication course, assigning groups would be more appropriate. Each student is then given a handout describing that a nuclear holocaust has occurred and there are only 12 survivors left. There is only enough food and water in the shelter for six people. Each group then receives a profile on each of the 12 survivors. These individuals are from different ethnic/cultural groups describing their skills, knowledge, or characteristics in helping build a new world. The profiles also include gender, ethnic

background, or race which could be perceived as detrimental depending on the individual's values and prejudices.

The students are not made aware that the focus in cultural diversity. The students are then forced to decide on six people who will be turned away from the shelter. A group consensus must be made. Participants must defend their choices rigorously. Once each group's decision has been made, it is presented to the entire class. The survivors are presented as well as justifications for their choices. Doing this often leads to heated arguments, some revealing assumptions, and justifications presented, often surprising the proponents themselves. The instructor then can introduce constructions of race, ethnicity, and culture to analyze the discussion. Furthermore these constructions can be recognized perhaps in the negotiation process toward consensus.

The students then go back to their small groups and are asked to reflect on their process of decision making. They compare the choices they made and try to identify what, if any, ethnic patterns or biases operated in their choices. Each individual then expresses their approval or disapproval, acknowledging their feelings and thoughts about each of the choices made.

The class then lists the knowledge, skills, traditions, culture and/or races that would be lost in the new world based on their six choices. The conclusion to this activity is a brief in class essay on what they learned about themselves and members of other ethnic groups as a result from the activity.

Students often reveal that they were so caught up in the survival for the new

world and who would best contribute to the ongoing of humanity, race never entered into their deliberations. Many are then aware, sometimes for the first time, that all people must contribute to society and when the odds are stacked up for the worse, race and ethnicity are not the most important factors. This leads into a comfortable transition then into stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination.

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